If former NFL head coach Dennis Green was a boxing announcer at Oracle Arena Saturday night in Oakland he would have looked at Andre Ward and hollered, “You were who you said you were!’’ Indeed he was.

Ward is one of those fighters who nobody respects until after he’s beaten them and in some cases not even then. Certainly it seemed that way after referee Jack Reiss stepped in at 1:42 of the 11th round and stopped Ward’s fight with badly bleeding WBA super middleweight champion Mikkel Kessler to give the 25-year-old former Olympic gold medalist his first world title and a strong opening position in SHOWTIME’s Super Six 168-pound tournament.

Kessler was favored not only in this fight but to win the entire tournament, something which still could happen although it didn’t seem that way by the time Ward was done with him. Ward was ahead on all three judges’ cards by wide margins, including that of Sweden’s Mikael Hook who had it 97-93; he was added when Kessler’s promoter complained about the makeup of the judges and the inclusion of Reiss, an American referee whom they believed was not a neutral observer.

Despite those concerns, Kessler and his promoter had been dismissive of Ward leading up to the fight, citing Kessler’s vaster experience and familiarity with the kind of pressure that comes only on nights like this one.

Their attitude came as no surprise to Ward, who has been lightly regarded throughout his career dating back to when the 2004 Olympics opened in Athens. That summer he became the only American boxer to win a gold medal and had to beat the reigning world champion to even get to the gold medal round. That victory was considered an upset to everyone but Ward.

The professional boxing world has looked at him with much the same lowered expectations even though he entered the fight 21-0 with 13 knockouts and had recently undressed former contender Edison Miranda. It was not until halfway through the bout, with Kessler’s right eye having a big divot above it and a smaller one below it, that it seemed to dawn on Kessler what was happening.

Unexpectedly, the young and relatively untested Ward was again doing what he alone expected to do. He was doing far more than expected.

“They’ve minimized him his whole career but we’re glad they did,’’ said Ward’s trainer Virgil Hunter. “The way Andre does things, the strategy he uses and the skills he possesses he never gets credit.’’

In a sense, he still hasn’t. Although Ward’s speed and work rate were more than Kessler could keep up with, after the fight was stopped Kessler and promoter Wilfried Sauerland spent much of the post-fight discussion insisting they had been victimized by an unfair referee and an

inexperienced kid's ability to use his elbows and head on someone who had more professional knockouts than Ward had fights. How that would be possible is difficult to fathom but Kessler insisted he had been a victim not of Ward's skills but of the deeply religious Ward's allegedly devilish nature.

"He was the better man tonight but I would have liked the fight to go another minute,'' Kessler (42-2, 32) said. "I was cut but the cuts weren't that bad.

"He threw a lot of elbows and there were a lot of head butts. I don't want to sit and complain here all the time (even though he had been doing just that) but I wasn't happy with the referee.''

He should have been more concerned with Ward, who was clearly faster and busier from the fight's opening moments to its bloody conclusion. Ward was relaxed and confident from the opening bell and it showed. He dominated Kessler throughout, seemingly never being where Kessler expected and punching him from angles from which he had could find no protective cover.

"I was not intimidated by Kessler's record,'' Ward said, making clear the obvious. "I was surprised he didn't change up. He kept doing the same thing over and over.''

Mostly Kessler kept getting hit. Never once did the champion seem to hurt Ward but the champion was rocked by an uppercut in the fourth round and continually forced to retreat as Ward kept the pressure on him. Kessler appeared to be someone who had grown so used to the more plodding European style he normally faces that he could not adjust to Ward's speed and movement or his constantly moving hands. As the rounds wore on and he wore down, Kessler did less and less, finally retreating into a shell to try and protect what was now a bloody face and rapidly blurring vision.

"I just couldn't see because he kept heat butting me,'' Kessler said, not complaining of course. "He was holding me all the time. It ruined my plan.''

That was Ward's job wasn't it? Whatever he was doing and however he was doing it, Ward was also ruining the plans of all those who thought this tournament would devolve into an all-European affair between Kessler, England's Carl Froch and Germany's Arthur Abraham. Both Froch and Abraham won their opening round fights over Americans Andre Dirrell and Jermain Taylor but Ward's stoppage of Kessler gave him the maximum amount of points with two more first round fights to go.

Ward is scheduled to fight Taylor (or whomever replaces him if he pulls out as some expect) next and then Dirrell, while Kessler faces Froch after his eye heals and then Taylor or his replacement. Dirrell faces Abraham next. In the final first round fights, Froch fights Abraham and Kessler fights Taylor or perhaps Allan Green, who is the tournament's first alternate.

"I think this will make the tournament more exciting,'' Kessler conceded after Ward's upset. "I don't want to be the favorite.''

He no longer is. Neither is Andre Ward, which should come as no surprise to him. That mantle now belongs to the undefeated former middleweight champion Abraham, who handily beat Taylor before knocking him cold in the final round. But as he has proven before, Andre Ward is more than Mikkel Kessler, and most of the boxing world, thought he was, considerably more.

“This is kind of a shock to them and sometimes when things don’t go your way you respond this way,’’ Ward said of Kessler’s lack of graciousness. “Froch has made it clear it’s going to be an all-Euro tournament. That was disrespectful. Things have changed. Everybody has got to go back to the drawing board because of me and what I did. We just beat the toughest guy.’’

Maybe…unless that guy is the kid from Oakland all along.